



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Love binds all Christian communities

1. Faith, hope and love are like three stars that rise in the sky of our spiritual life to guide us to God. They are the theological virtues *par excellence*: they put us in communion with God and lead us to him. They form a triptych, whose apex is found in love, the *agape* excellently praised by Paul in a hymn of the First Letter to the Corinthians. It is sealed by the following declaration: "So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (13: 13).

To the extent that they enliven the disciples of Christ, the three theological virtues spur them on towards unity, in accordance with Paul's words which we heard at the beginning: "One body ..., one hope ... one Lord, one faith ..., one God and Father" (Eph 4: 4-6). Continuing to reflect on the ecumenical perspective discussed in the preceding catechesis, today we want to look more closely at the role of the theological virtues in the journey that leads to full communion with God, with the Trinity and with others.

2. In the passage quoted from the Letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle primarily extols the unity of *faith*. This unity has its source in the word of God, which all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities consider a light for the steps of their journey in history (cf. Ps 119: 105). Together the Churches and the Ecclesial Communities profess their faith in "one Lord", Jesus Christ true God and true man, and in "one God and Father of us all" (Eph 4: 5-6). This fundamental unity, together with that constituted by the one Baptism, is clearly apparent in the many documents of the ecumenical dialogue, even when there remain reasons for reservation on this or that point. Thus we read, for example, in a document of the World Council of Churches: "Christians believe that the "only true God' who made himself known to Israel was revealed in "him whom you have

sent', Jesus Christ (Jn 17: 3); that in Christ, God reconciled the world to himself (2 Cor 5: 19) and that, through his Holy Spirit, God brings new and eternal life to all those who, through Christ, entrust themselves to him" (WCC, *Confessare una sola fede*, 1992, n. 6).

The Churches and Ecclesial Communities all have a common reference-point in the ancient Creeds and the definitions of the early Ecumenical Councils. However, certain doctrinal divergences remain to be overcome, so that the journey towards unity of faith can reach the fullness indicated by the promise of Christ: "They will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd" (Jn 10: 16)

3. Paul, in the text of the Letter to the Ephesians that we have taken as the emblem of our meeting, also speaks about one *hope* to which we have been called (cf. 4: 4). It is a hope that is expressed in our common commitment, through prayer and an actively consistent life, to the coming of the kingdom of God. Within this vast horizon, the ecumenical movement has been oriented towards basic goals that are interrelated as objectives of one hope: the unity of the Church, the evangelization of the world, liberation and peace in the human community. The ecumenical journey has also taken advantage of the dialogue with the earthly and humanistic hopes of our time, even with the hidden hope, apparently defeated, of the "hopeless". In the face of these many expressions of hope in our time, Christians, despite the tensions among them and the trial of division, have been impelled to discover and bear witness to "a common reason for hope" (WCC, Faith and Order Commission, *Sharing in One Hope*, Bangalore, 1978), recognizing in Christ the indestructible foundation. A French poet wrote: "To hope is difficult ... to despair is easy and is the great temptation" (Charles Péguy, *Le porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu*, ed. Pléiade, p. 538). But for us Christians, St Peter's exhortation always to account for the hope that is in us remains ever valid (cf. 1 Pt 3: 15).

4. At the apex of the three theological virtues is *love*, which Paul compares in a way to a golden knot that holds all the Christian communities in perfect harmony: "And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col 3: 14). Christ, in the solemn prayer for the disciples' unity, reveals the profound theological basis: "That the love with which you, [O Father], have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (Jn 17: 26). It is this very love, accepted and made to grow, which composes the Church in a single body, as Paul again indicates: "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (Eph 4: 15-16).

5. The ecclesial goal of love, and at the same time its inexhaustible source, is the Eucharist, communion with the Body and Blood of the Lord, an anticipation of perfect intimacy with God.

Unfortunately, as I recalled in our previous catechesis, in the relations between divided Christians, "due to disagreements in matters of faith, it is not yet possible to celebrate together the same

Eucharistic Liturgy. And yet we do have a burning desire to join in celebrating the one Eucharist of the Lord, and this desire itself is already a common prayer of praise, a single supplication. Together we speak to the Father and increasingly we do so "with one heart" (*Ut unum sint*, n. 45). The Council has reminded us that "this holy objective - the reconciliation of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ - transcends human powers and gifts". We must therefore put all our hope "in the prayer of Christ for the Church, in the love of the Father for us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 24).

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I am happy to welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors who are here today, in particular the Lutheran Ladies' Choir from Iceland and the American military personnel led by Archbishop Edwin O'Brien. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Japan, Canada and the United States, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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